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© Department of Musicology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

MIECZYSLAW TOMASZEWSKI (Kraków)

Towards perfect completeness remembering Lutosławski

ABSTRACT: The text is in its character a statement by a “witness to an era”. It is an attempt at describing Lutosławski’s artistic path and his culture-forming activity from the perspective of an evolution within a concrete historical and political situation. This aesthetic evolution is evidenced in the composer’s utterances: significant interviews and private, confessional notes. They outline his creative path from the impact of Chopin as the emotional arché, through subsequent phases and breakthroughs: from academic aesthetics based on the Hanslick paradigm, through socialist-realist indoctrination and uncritical fascination with the avant-garde, to a gradual crystallisation of his own idiom. Eventually, this entirely own idiom, marked with a lyrical opening, consists in a return to everlasting values, expressly defined by the composer: the truth and the beauty of a work of art.

KEYWORDS: Lutosławski, evolution in art, a work’s political context, Chopin as arché, autotelism and avant-garde, the truth of a work of art

1.

I have been fortunate to meet Witold Lutosławski many times and in many situations.¹ And to come in contact with not a few aspects of his splendid personality. Not to mention his art, obviously.

The meetings were numerous, indeed innumerable. Over more than thirty years, I met him several times each year, not infrequently for many hours. Perhaps least of all as his editor; he delivered his scores composed with such precision and so faultlessly, so calligraphically copied in longhand by Danuta Lutosławska, that there was never any reason to ask. It was all perfectly clear.

In fact, Lutosławski was associated with the publishing house as the President of its Editing Board for several decades. At the time, representatives of Communist authorities took part in its proceedings, hence the need for tacit

¹ For a broader discussion, see the interview: Grzegorz Michalski, *Lutosławski w pamięci. 20 rozmów o kompozytorze* [Lutosławski in Memory. 20 Conversations on the Composers], (Gdańsk, 2007), 129–140.

agreements, information, decisions taken beforehand. The main thing was for the Board to support rather than undermine the work of the publishing house, even when that work went against the authorities' expectations. From year to year, Lutosławski's reputation and status played an increasingly significant part; and when Andrzej Panufnik left the country, the author of *Concerto for Orchestra* became the *number one* composer for the regime.

The Union of Polish Composers was another battlefield for Polish issues. There, too, strategy required counteraction against periodic attempts to enslave the Union by the Party through malcontents and serviles. Each election had to be carefully planned out by a narrow group. "Lutos", as we called him, was omnipresent then, although he never accepted top positions. Thus we would meet – in moments which were, for me, particularly important and instructive – say, at the round table at the seat of the Union in Warsaw's Old City for a meeting of the Membership Committee. Its verdicts were crucial for the Union's maintenance of its members' high *ethos* as well as their high professional standards.

Perhaps my closest connection to Lutosławski was in 1976-81, in the so-called Baranów period, when, during the yearly symposia-cum-festivals at Baranów Sandomierski, discussions, concerts, presentations and panels on the music just performed went on from dawn to dusk and ended in nightly madness that brought together the Lutosławskis, the Pendereckis, the Góreckis; Zygmunt Mycielski and Konstanty Regamey; Wisława Szymborska, Anna Kamieńska, Iwaszkiewicz and so many others. I never remember the author of *Les espaces du sommeil* to be more at ease, more his own self, than there, where he interpreted his own compositions for us, exhibiting a deep understanding of modern French poetry, in which many of his own works were rooted.

Yet can I say that, having met him so many times, I have come to know him? Our understanding was immediate in professional, musical matters; equally so in terms of ideas, ethics, patriotism, public issues. But, despite all that – perhaps for his nature and character, his excellent manners and his high style of living – he remained as if behind a curtain.

2.

Not always. Infrequently, he would open up. And say things like: "After all, I've been raised on Dmowski's knee!" Or own up to going through moments of crisis, when he felt the need for a private retreat with a Benedictine monk of his acquaintance at Tyniec. Or when, invited to a Christian Cul-

² See Leszek Polony (ed.), *Muzyka w kontekście kultury* [Music in the Context of Culture], (Kraków, 1978), and Teresa Malecka, Leszek Polony (eds.), *Muzyka w muzyce* [Music in Music], (Kraków, 1980).

ture Week in Kraków³ during the martial law, he asked me: “Do you think I have the right to take part in this?”

Such were his moments of openness; usually, he was impermeable to all that could endanger his privacy. This is why, too, in spite of many of our joint or allied actions, he remained unfathomable in some areas. Any explanation there is could be based on the uncertain supposition that his personality concealed a hidden struggle between contradictory tendencies; concealed, one might add, thanks to his uncommon urbanity.

I think that, deep down, Lutosławski was a Romantic born at a time of Neo-positivist philosophy and Neo-classical style, and condemned to live at a time of an aggressive avant-garde. I am well aware that this thesis applied to the author of *Venetian Games*, the creator of limited aleatorism, can cause resistance or, at the very least, surprise. But all one needs is to listen carefully to his music, especially that of his final years. And to read – without self-censorship, without turning a blind eye – to Lutosławski’s exegeses of his own works, to his interviews and his memoirs, *Zapiski*, called a *journal of thoughts*⁴ – to give this supposition some thought.

In fact, this has already been done by some of his monographers. The authors of the monumental monograph, Krzysztof Meyer and Danuta Gwizdalanka, confronted more than a single discrepancy or contradiction⁵. Charles Bodman Rae⁶ tried to explain the differences by maintaining that they only existed between Lutosławski’s public (if usually discreet) utterances and the frankness of his private conversations. Maciej Gołąb might have gone too far when he said that Lutosławski’s aesthetics seems, at times, to lead “a double life.”⁷

Now all these contradictions – whether real or not – can be understood if the entire phenomenon be viewed in a diachronic rather than a synchronic perspective. For the inner discourse of the author of *Little Suite* and *Musique funèbre* went on and changed from phase to phase, at that not without anticipations or echoes.

³ Witold Lutosławski, *Spotkanie z kompozytorem* [A Meeting with the Composer], in *Dialog z kulturą. Materiały z Tygodnia Kultury Chrześcijańskiej* [Dialogue with Culture. Proceedings of the Christian Culture Week], ed. Natalia Misiniec (Kraków, 1986).

⁴ Witold Lutosławski, *Zapiski* [Notes], ed. Zbigniew Skowron (Warszawa, 2008).

⁵ Danuta Gwizdalanka and Krzysztof Meyer, *Lutosławski*, vol. 1; *Droga do dojrzałości* [The Road to Maturity], vol. 2. *Droga do mistrzostwa* [The Road to Mastery], (Kraków, 2004/2005).

⁶ Charles Bodman Rae, *Muzyka Lutosławskiego* [The Music of Lutosławski], (Warszawa, 1996).

⁷ Maciej Gołąb, *Wczesna twórczość kompozytorska Witolda Lutosławskiego – jej konteksty estetyczne i ideologiczne* [The Early Output of Witold Lutosławski – its Aesthetic and Ideological Contexts], in *Witold Lutosławski i jego wkład do kultury muzycznej XX wieku* [Witold Lutosławski and His Contribution to the Musical Culture of the 20th Century], ed. Jadwiga Paja-Stach (Kraków, 2005), 16.

3.

His road began with enchantment and poignancy. It might have been Chopin who awoke the musician and the composer in Witold Lutosławski. There is his own report of how, to conceal his emotion, he hid under the table when his teacher played the B flat minor *Scherzo*. He remembers it as “the most powerful impression of my earliest childhood.”⁸ Thus the music of Chopin remained his *arché*, his point of reference.⁹ It might have resonated so strongly because it touched the fundamental trauma of his childhood, the tragic fate of his father, executed by the Bolsheviks. “To this day I return, from time to time, to Chopin’s music,” he confessed once. “These returns are dear to me in bad moments in my life. They inject me with life-giving force and strengthen my belief in the existence of a better, an ideal world of creative imagination.”¹⁰

School, university, the professional circle of those times dampened the original feelings. Lutosławski – and, in fact, entire generations of the 20th century – became surrounded with the aura of the Hanslick paradigm,¹¹ consolidated by Neo-positivism and expressed in the famous phrase that music is but “*tönend bewegte Form*.” It was a paradigm that decided, for almost a century, what was, and what was not, “aesthetical correctness.” It became *en vogue* to see music as an autotelic art – removed from life, unconnected with emotions, carrying neither meaning nor value – apart from purely formal qualities.

And this is why texts of the author of *Venetian Games* abound in statements of this kind:

– “[I come to the conclusion] for a thousandth time: music expresses no definite emotion, it only defines a formal framework.”¹²

– “It had never been my task to transpose extra-musical experience to the language of music. Does this mean I have locked myself inside an ebony tower? In a way, it does.”¹³

– “Value. Are there any objective criteria for evaluating a work of music? There are not. This is not even an issue for me.”¹⁴

⁸ Witold Lutosławski, ‘Powroty’ [Returns], *Polska* 9 (1970).

⁹ See Witold Lutosławski, *Post scriptum*, selected and edited by Danuta Gwizdalanka and Krzysztof Meyer, (Warszawa, 1999), especially 112–115.

¹⁰ Lutosławski, ‘Powroty’.

¹¹ Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch – Schönen*, (Leipzig, 1854).

¹² Zbigniew Skowron (ed.), *Witold Lutosławski. Zapiski* (Warszawa, 2008), Entry of 13 March 1961.

¹³ Stefan Jarociński (ed.), *Witold Lutosławski. Materiały do monografii*, [Materials to a Monograph], (Kraków, 1967).

¹⁴ Various manifestations of this theme: Tadeusz Kaczyński, *Rozmowy z Witoldem Lutosławskim* [Conversations with Witold Lutosławski], (Kraków, 1972), 142, 146; Witold

– “My music is all play.”¹⁵

And yet: when he composed his *Five Songs* to lyrics by Iłakowiczówna, he did his best to differentiate and to characterize the tones of *singing* and *angry* bells. When he wrote *Mi-parti* – he tried to tell apart *warm* and *icy* tones. In *Preludes and a Fugue*, he stated the expression of the individual phases of the piece as *cantabile*, *grazioso*, *lamentoso*, *mistico*, *extatico*, *furioso*,

And yet: this enemy of value judgements served on numerous musical competition juries, where it was his work to evaluate the musical scores entered.

His autotelic position made him come closer to the avant-garde. This began with empathy, followed by an attitude of tolerance, one that gives *carte blanche* to all novelty. To a degree, he felt he belonged to the avant-garde. “I am often seen as its part,” he confessed, “and I like it.”¹⁶ But there came a time when, having gone through an ultimate experience, he came to the conclusion that he did not like “the emperor’s new clothes.” He recounted his shock and his disillusionment at a “work” of music (at a concert of new music in Stockholm), which consisted in running a Bosch power saw through a grand piano carried on stage.

4.

And one can say that he retreated, step by step, from treating the Hanslick paradigm as a catechism, from absolute trust in the avant-garde.

His statements, first in his memoirs, then in interviews, began to sound unlike his own earlier statements, and, at times, like outright contradictions.

– “Novelty is the least everlasting feature of a work.”¹⁷

– “Revolution now? There is nothing to revolutionize, all is in decay.”¹⁸

– “It is hard to express how much I’m fed up with this...”¹⁹

He heralded “the bankruptcy of the Darmstadt school”²⁰ that stood at the basis of the new avant-garde. He came to the conclusion that Schönberg

Lutosławski, ‘Z rozmyślań nad przyszłością muzyki’ [From Thoughts on the Future of Music], *Postscriptum* 1999, 101.

¹⁵ Bohdan Pilarski, ‘Wywiad z Witoldem Lutosławskim’ [Interview with Witold Lutosławski], *Współczesność* 20 (1961).

¹⁶ Kaczyński, *Rozmowy z Witoldem Lutosławskim*, 95.

¹⁷ Witold Lutosławski, ‘O muzyce dzisiaj: o własnych utworach’ [On Music Today: On His Own Works], in *Lutosławski. Sesja naukowa* [Lutosławski. A Scholarly Session], ed. Leszek Polony (Kraków, 1980; Kraków, 1985).

¹⁸ Skowron, *Witold Lutosławski. Zapiski*, Entry of 19 Oct. 1979.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Entry of 1964/65, 40.

²⁰ Irina Nikolska, *Muzyka to nie tylko dźwięki. Rozmowy z Witoldem Lutosławskim...* [Music is not Just Sounds. Conversations with Witold Lutosławski], (Kraków, 2000), 83.

blocked a spontaneous and natural development of the musical language. He compared post-Webern music to “a tiresome fly” that “would not go away.”²¹

At the same time, Lutosławski expressed, with increasing frequency, his longing for synthesis, for stable values. “The time has come for melodies to have its say,” he said in a conversation with Irina Nikolska.²² In his private memoir, he confessed to himself: “Better a truly-experienced triad than a fashion-imposed tone cluster. Better real iron than false gold.”²³

5.

Starting with his talk of December 11th, 1981 – at the Congress of Polish Culture, brutally interrupted by the imposition of the martial law – entitled *Around the Issues of Truth in a Work of Art*, with his text presented at the Christian Culture Week in Kraków during that same martial law in September 1983,²⁴ and with his honorary degree speech at the Jagiellonian University in 1984,²⁵ the language of Lutosławski undergoes almost a radical transformation. He speaks of values instead of play. *Expressis verbis*: of truth, goodness, beauty, unashamedly reverting to once-discarded words.

A series of interviews appears with meaningful content and meaningful titles:

“A work should be the fruit of inspiration” (an interview by Elżbieta Markowska).²⁶

“Music is not just sounds” (a book by Irina Nikolska).²⁷

“Art and duty” (an interview by Grzegorz Michalski).²⁸

The composer himself says, at a Pen Club meeting: “What is the essence of music? A metaphysical thrill.”²⁹

Elsewhere he confides that the value of a work depends on “moments of enchantment” that stood at the basis of the work. “Without these,” Lutosławski claims, “music is but an intellectual game.”³⁰

²¹ Stefan Jarociński (ed.), *Witold Lutosławski. Materiały*, 42.

²² Nikolska, *Muzyka to nie tylko dźwięki*.

²³ Skowron, *Witold Lutosławski. Zapiski*.

²⁴ W. Lutosławski, *Wokół zagadnienia prawdy w dziele sztuki* [On the Issue of Truth in a Work of Art], in *Post scriptum*, selected and edited by D. Gwizdalanka and K. Meyer, (Warszawa, 1999).

²⁵ “Ruch Muzyczny” 2 (1985), and *Posłowie* [Afterword], (Warszawa, 1999).

²⁶ Elżbieta Markowska, ‘Wywiad z Witoldem Lutosławskim’ [Interview with Witold Lutosławski], *Ruch Muzyczny* 22 (1990).

²⁷ Nikolska, *Muzyka to nie tylko dźwięki*.

²⁸ Grzegorz Michalski, ‘Wywiad z Witoldem Lutosławskim’ [Interview with Witold Lutosławski], *Znak* 8 (1998), 399.

²⁹ A paper given at the Pen Club. See Tadeusz Kaczyński, *Lutosławski, życie i muzyka* [Lutosławski, His Life and Music], (Warszawa, 1995), 225.

But these words have been written not by the author of the experimental *Venetian Games*; they have been uttered by the composer of the series of absolute masterpieces he has presented us with in his late and final years: *Partita*, *Chain II* (in the unforgettable performance by Anne-Sophie Muter), *Symphonies Nos. 3 and 4* or the equally unforgettable cycle of truly infinitely charming *Chantefables et chantefleurs* (as performed by Solveig Kringleborn).

All these works restored to the musical stage an almost chopinian singing quality – from the subtle *cantabile* in *Partita* to the powerful *cantanti uniti* in *Symphony No. 3*. And an expressive narrativity – as a reminder of the fact that music is a speech of sorts. At long last, they resonated, as of old, with the triad of ultimate, of ideal values, spearheaded by truth and beauty.

As one listens to this music, one can come to the conclusion that the author of *Symphony No. 3* reached, in his late years and works, a moment of absolute and perfect completeness. I am of the opinion that it has been reached in an act of great synthesis of which his return to his own *arché* was a significant part; an act equivalent to discovering strata of his own lyricism of Romantic provenience.³¹

Translated by Jan Rybicki

³⁰ In an interview by Elżbieta Markowska, 'Utwór winien być owocem natchnienia' [A Work Should Be the Fruit of Inspiration], *Ruch Muzyczny* 22 (1990).

³¹ An early version of this text was given at a Pen Club *soirée* in memory of Witold Lutosławski, Warsaw, 11 May 2009.

